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LETTER DATED 3 APRIL 1997 FROM THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

I refer to my predecessor's report of 19 November 1996 on the United Nations Preventive Deployment Force (UNPREDEP) in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (S/1996/961) and to Security Council resolution 1082 (1996) of 27 November 1996 on the same subject.

In his report, my predecessor pointed out that the current mandate of UNPREDEP in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is of a preventive nature, aimed at enabling the country to weather a turbulent and hazardous period. The role of UNPREDEP - previously a part of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) - under Security Council resolution 795 (1992) was to establish a United Nations presence on the border of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia with Albania and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, with a view to monitoring and reporting developments in those areas that could undermine confidence and stability in the country or threaten its territory. It was intended that such a presence would also deter threats from any source and help prevent the possibility of clashes between external elements and the country's forces.

As members of the Council will recall, my predecessor also noted in his report that peace and stability in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia were intimately linked to the overall situation in the region. However, recent developments had made the original purpose of deploying a United Nations mission - to prevent conflicts elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia from spilling over to that country - more remote. The relative tranquillity in the area and the desire to achieve economies in peacekeeping operations therefore led my predecessor to recommend a phased reduction of the military component of UNPREDEP by 300 all ranks by 1 April 1997. The Security Council endorsed that recommendation in resolution 1082 (1996) and decided that the proposed reduction should be effected by 30 April 1997.

Recent developments in Albania and the resulting situation of lawlessness and banditry in certain parts of that country have demonstrated that stability in the Balkan region remains extremely fragile. The Security Council, in its Presidential statement of 13 March 1997 (S/PRST/1997/14) and in its resolution 1101 (1997) of 28 March 1997, has expressed its deep concern over this

deteriorating situation, stressed the importance of regional stability and, in this context, expressed its full support for the diplomatic efforts of the international community to find a peaceful solution to the crisis.

While there appears to be no imminent danger of the problems in Albania spilling over to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the current crisis is a source of great anxiety in that country. As members of the Security Council are aware, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, in a letter addressed to me on 7 March 1997 (S/1997/205), has underlined the seriousness of the situation and requested that the reduction of the UNPREDEP military component be suspended. The volatility of the situation has also caused both my Special Representative and the Force Commander of UNPREDEP to convey to me their concern about the timing of the downsizing of the Force.

As the Council was informed, UNPREDEP began the mandated reduction of its military component at the end of March when it started the process of dismantling its observation posts along the borders with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Albania. Although this did not affect the number of patrols or the effectiveness of UNPREDEP's monitoring activities, the commencement of the closure of the observation posts, which coincided with the crisis in Albania, was misperceived and resulted in immediate criticism of UNPREDEP in the local press. Considering the situation in the region, my Special Representative and the Force Commander, with my agreement, have temporarily suspended the drawdown of the military component. However, in order to meet the 30 April deadline for the mandated reduction in force levels, UNPREDEP will be required to resume the drawdown in the coming days.

UNPREDEP has considered the possibility of concentrating the drawdown on the border between the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. However, there is a clear possibility that reducing UNPREDEP's strength on the northern border at this sensitive time might have negative repercussions. This would be particularly true if the situation in Albania continued to deteriorate, with possible effects on minority Albanian-speaking populations throughout the region.

UNPREDEP has, to date, been a most successful mission. However, proceeding with the planned reduction during a period when further regional instability continues to be a possibility could put at risk the credibility of the international community's first serious effort at preventive deployment. In the light of the above, and on the basis of the advice of my Special Representative, I recommend that the Security Council approve the suspension of the reduction of the UNPREDEP military component until the end of the current mandate on 31 May 1997.

I should be grateful if you would bring the present letter to the attention of the members of the Security Council.

(Signed) Kofi A. ANNAN